

**Lessons from a hill**  
**“When You Fast”**  
**W/C 28<sup>th</sup> Apr 2024**

In Matthew 6:1-18 Jesus teaches on three spiritual practices - giving, praying, and fasting. Of these three practices, the one that is most neglected by followers of Jesus is fasting. It is interesting that Jesus assumes that his disciples will practice all three. He didn't say, "You must fast," which is legalistic. Nor did he say, "If you fast," which is optional. Rather, he said, "When you fast ..." The disciples didn't need to be told to fast; they only needed instruction on how to do it properly. So why is it that, today, fasting is given such a low priority by followers of Jesus?

**Welcome:** How do we react to the idea of fasting?

**Worship:** Spend some time in worship. Plan an act of worship that is appropriate to your group.

**Word:** Looking at God's word together:

**Read: Matthew 6:1-18**

1. What is a hypocrite and why did Jesus describe the Pharisees in this way?
2. Why did the Pharisees so publicly display the spiritual practices?
  - Are we sometimes guilty of doing the same?
3. In what way have the Pharisees "received their reward in full" (v16)?
  - Why is Jesus' statement so tragic?
4. Why does Jesus want his disciples to hide the evidence that they were fasting?
5. What are the "rewards" of obedience?
6. What challenges do you face in making fasting a regular practice?

Give everyone a copy of the attached page, which lays out some biblical foundations for fasting.

**Witness:** How would encourage someone to start fasting?

**Prayer:**

- Pray that God will continue to build his holy character in your life.
- Pray for the witness of the church.
- Pray for those on the mission field.
- Pray for the Summer Fun Day being planned for July.

**Some examples from the past:**

- According to Epiphanius, Bishop of Salamis, fasting twice a week was the regular practice of Christians in the fourth century.
- The Reformers, such Luther, Calvin, Knox and Latimer, all practised prayer with fasting and claimed an increased effectiveness in their ministries.
- John Wesley said that "some have exalted religious fasting beyond all Scripture and reason; and others have utterly disregarded it". He didn't want a person to be ordained unless they agreed to fast as least twice a week until 4pm.
- Jonathan Edwards, who was powerfully used by God, would fast and pray continuously for three days and nights.
- Pastor Yonggi Cho, was the pastor the world's largest church, in Korea, wrote, "We have seen that fasting and prayer causes one to become much more spiritually sensitive to the our Lord, causing more power in one's life to combat the forces of Satan."

## So why Fast?

In the Bible, fasting is assumed rather than directly commanded.

*“When you fast, do not look sombre as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. **But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.”** Matthew 6:16-18*

Both in the Old and New Testaments, fasting was a general practice amongst the people of God; Moses, Elijah, Esther, Nehemiah, Daniel, and Paul, all fasted at crucial times. Jesus both taught and modelled fasting. Godly men and women throughout the centuries have used fasting as a means to draw near to God.

Fasting is more than just skipping a few meals. It is giving up eating, or something else, for a period of time to focus more completely on God.

There are a number of possible reasons for fasting:

- To humble yourself before God in confession and repentance (Jonah 3:5, 5:10; Neh. 1:4-7)
- For spiritual renewal
- To seek guidance about a major decision (Judges 20:26-28; Acts 13:1-3)
- To focus on prayer for a particular need (Ezra 8:21)
- To develop discipline and learn to deny physical cravings (1 Cor. 9:27)
- When engaged in spiritual warfare (Matthew 4:1-11)

### **Fasting is ...**

- Not a way to “pay” for your sins or “earn” God’s love.
- Not a way to “force” God to do something.
- Not a way to show off or prove your spirituality.
- Not a way to lose weight or improve your health.

### **Fasting is ...**

- Not so much about food as it is about focus.
- Not so much about saying no to the body as it is about saying yes to the Spirit.
- Not about doing without, it is about looking within.
- An outward response to an inward attitude and cry of the soul.
- Not a means of seeking God's blessings, as much as it is a means of seeking God.
- Not a test for super saints, it is not a means of twisting God's arm, and it is not a magical formula for getting through to God.
- Feasting on the Lord. Looking to him for comfort, power, strength, guidance, forgiveness, and hope.

## Types of fasting

You might be thinking, “Ah, I couldn’t possibly do without food for a whole week.” Fasting is not about punishing yourself, as said earlier, it’s about focusing our attention on God.

Consider the following types of fasting:

- **Complete fast:** You don’t eat any food at all, and only drink water & juice. You might do this for a whole week, or just one day. You might only skip breakfast or lunch for the whole week, or just do it for one day. Do what is comfortable-ish for you. Spend the time you would normally eat in prayer.
- **Partial fast:** give up some, but not all foods (e.g. give up meat, sweets, chocolate, Coffee etc.). Whenever you crave what you give up, turn to prayer instead.
- **Non-food fasts:** give up TV, social media, etc. Instead use the time to pray.